

Do You Have What It Takes?

The first five years of marriage can be a roller coaster. The feelings of love, romance, and joy can be so intense as you are starting your life together, but so can those feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and anger. Despite how long you and your spouse have known each other, marriage can change everything—for better and for worse. With marriage comes a new level of commitment, a challenge to cultivate a deeper level of trust. You can't help surrendering more of yourselves to each other, and that can be a wonderful thing, but it also raises the stakes—and the potential challenges—a couple can face.

The majority of divorces (about 20 percent) occur within the first ten years of marriage with about 10

percent occurring in the first five years and another 10 percent occurring in the second five years of marriage.¹ That's not surprising since the early years of marriage represent the time that couples are getting to know each other on a whole different level. The good news is that you can use the early years of your marriage to establish truly important healthy-relationship habits that can strengthen your bond today and keep your marriage growing stronger every day for as long as you both shall live.

The first five years of marriage represent the time that a couple is laying the foundation for a sound relationship. The habits and attitudes you cultivate now can spell the difference between a marriage that is built on sand and a marriage that can grow more passionate and beautiful, not just in spite of the toughest tests life can throw at it, but also because of the way you have braved those challenges together. Your marriage can be a great love story that your children tell their children—a story that inspires everyone you know because of your example.

In order for your marriage to become that great love story there are certain things you need to establish in your early years together because relationships tend to build and grow on precedent. The way you live now can predict the attitudes you will have toward your marriage ten, twenty, thirty years from now. Although the challenges life throws at you will change, the patterns you lay down now will predict how easy it will be for the two of you to overcome those challenges while still having time and energy for each other. The couple that takes these early years for granted and assumes that

you will always have the same kind of time that you have for each other once kids and careers start kicking into high gear will be in for a huge and unpleasant surprise. By contrast, the couple that is intentional about laying down good marriage habits in the first five years has a much greater likelihood of staying close, strong, and happy when life starts picking up speed.

Do You Have What It Takes?

Almost every newly married couple we encounter has two things in common. First, they are deeply in love with each other and rightly excited about the lives they are building together. They are passionate about each other, and hopeful about a bright future filled with blessings. But second, underneath that mutual love, joy, and hope, almost every newly married couple is also a little terrified. They wonder if they have what it takes to make it “until death do us part.” Almost every couple we talk to in our years of marriage ministry ask us one basic question; “How can we know if we have what it takes to make it to ‘happily ever after’?”

We can give you the answer to that question right now. Do you have what it takes? *Yes!* Absolutely, you have what it takes to have a great Catholic marriage. Contrary to what you might have heard elsewhere, it doesn't matter where you've come from, what your background is, or what your family of origin did or did not give you. We know from years of marriage research that what separates so-called “marriage masters” from “marriage disasters” is not magic or history; it's a set of teachable skills that happy couples have either picked up along the way or are willing to learn “on the job,”

as it were.² Throughout this book, we'll explore the things you need to do now, in the early years of your life together, that will help you create the marriage God wants you to have, a marriage founded on the kind of love that satisfies your soul and makes the world stand up and take notice of what God can do when a couple lets him into their home.

While there are many good habits you can cultivate to lay the foundation for a great Catholic marriage, ultimately it is your willingness to have an unwavering commitment to four things that will help you and your spouse become "marriage masters":

1. individual and couple prayer
2. nurture your love
3. each other, but an even stronger commitment to your vows
4. learn new skills when new challenges come instead of giving into a tendency to blame your marriage or spouse for being "broken"

Each of these is rooted in solid research that examines what separates marriage success stories from marriage nightmares, and each of these is borne out in our experience—of which we will share a bit with you in this chapter. Let's look at each of these four commitments.

Individual and Couple Prayer

Couples who pray together stay together. Research consistently shows that couples who share and cultivate their religious commitment (both at church *and* at home)

are significantly more likely to be happy together and stay together for a lifetime.³

The early years of marriage are the best time to establish those regular rituals of couple prayer time, faithful Mass attendance, and regular confession that give you the grace you need to be patient and loving with each other as you confront each other's weaknesses head-on.

You need to be absolutely committed to your prayer life and be willing to let God teach you how to love each other with his love. Your human love will simply dry up on some days. It can't be helped. Marriage is hard work, and people inevitably burn out from hard work. Every couple goes through it periodically over the lifetime of their marriage. You don't have to be afraid of this happening (although, admittedly, it's never a pleasant experience at the time), but on those days when you feel your own ability to love running dry, you need to have something to lean on to jump-start your heart and start loving each other again. Your own experience of God's love via your commitment to an active and constant prayer life is the most reliable way to restart your loving actions (and the loving feelings which follow those actions). Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "Where a lone man may be overcome, two together can resist. A three-ply cord is not easily broken." In other words, you might not have the strength to create a great marriage on your own, but if both of you are committed to leaning on God (the third braid in the "three-ply cord" of Christian marriage), you will be unbreakable no matter what weight life asks you to carry.

For reasons we'll get into shortly, God truly does want you to have a fantastic marriage. If you give him the opportunity through couple prayer, he will teach you everything you need to know about creating a passionate, fulfilling, joyful, lifelong love. True, he won't send you an instruction manual, but he'll do something better: he will open up new depth of your hearts to each other in ways you never dreamed possible and empower you to experience a love you never even knew was possible to receive—much less give. We'll walk you through the steps of couple prayer later on, but for now, start wrapping your head around the idea that praying together has real power to make a tough marriage terrific and a good marriage great.

Nurture Your Love

Truly successful couples know that love doesn't just happen. You have to be committed to building the fire on an ongoing basis. When we built our home, we were unsure about having a fireplace. We couldn't really afford it, but by making adjustments in other places, we were able to scrape together enough money to make it possible. Years later, we've been so glad we made room for that expense. It adds so much romance and charm to our home. One of our favorite things to do in the cooler months is to build a big fire and spend time reading and playing board games together in front of the hearth. Sometimes we break for high tea in front of the fire with little finger sandwiches and tasty pastries that we've baked or purchased from our favorite pastry shop. And after the kids go to bed, cuddling by the fire is a great way to spend a romantic evening at home.

But keeping that fire going takes real effort. It means chopping, splitting, and stacking wood in the spring so it has time to cure for the following fall. It means carrying wood from the outdoor woodpile to the indoor rack so it's handy when we need it. When the fire is built, it means stirring the coals on a regular basis to get the hottest embers at the bottom of the pile back to the top and adding more logs every few hours so that the flames don't run out of fuel. That's the part they don't show in movies. There's real work that goes on behind the scenes that keeps the flames burning hot.

The same is true for love. Smart couples understand that to keep the fires of their love burning strong, they need to tend the flame by doing those little, extraordinary things for each other. Little surprises such as love notes in a lunch bag; calls to say, "I was thinking of you"; bringing home your spouse's favorite ice cream instead of yours; doing that chore your spouse hates so that you can say, "I want to make your life easier and more pleasant"; ordering and wearing that new lingerie on a night when you might rather just pass out because you want to say, "I still want you"; and many other little, thoughtful gestures go a long way to stirring the coals and keeping the embers of your love burning hot.

Too many couples think that the fires of love kindle themselves and that somehow the wood carries itself to the hearth while they just lie around on a bearskin rug, basking in the warmth. Real love—even real romantic love—doesn't work that way. Later on, we'll share some surefire ways to keep your hearts warm and your passion burning bright throughout your years together. But for now it is important to remember that loving

feelings follow loving actions. If the fire looks like it's getting a little low, don't panic, and for heaven's sake, don't whine about it. Go get some more wood! Stir the

embers. Don't wait for your mate to do the work. Inspire your partner by taking the first steps and do something loving. Your mutual commitment to tending the flames of your friendship and passion by doing little, loving things for each other every day—no

matter how busy, tired, sick, or frustrated you might feel in the moment—is one of the things that will help make your marriage be a welcome, safe, and happy place even when the storms of life are blowing hard against your home.

As you'll see in a bit, we've been through a lot in our years together, and life got really hard pretty quickly in those first months and years after we said "I do." When we reviewed some of these early-marriage experiences we're about to share with you, we looked at each other and said, "Holy cow! We really went through a lot in those first few years together!" The reason it came as such a surprise to us, though, was that no matter how hard or scary life became, we always worked hard to take care of each other. Even when we were tired, stressed, scared, and sure that the universe was going to fall down on top of us, we worked hard to remember to make that call to say, "I love you," to say that prayer together, to do that dreaded chore for the other, to give that thoughtful or silly gift that would bring a

smile to the other's face, to write that note that said we couldn't stop thinking about each other even when we were apart, to make time for affection and lovemaking—especially when we were tired or stressed—and to do a million other little things that made our marriage a safe shelter from the storm.

Because of that genuine, sustained effort to keep feeding the flames of love, when we look back, we don't really connect with how terrifying it all really was and how stupid we really were. We look back and see some of the best times in our lives together.

People say that love is a mystery. But it isn't love that's a mystery. The mystery is how such simple things as the ones we mentioned above can make even the hardest day feel as a gift when you are standing next to the person God gave you to be his best blessing in your life.

Commitment to Your Vows (Even More Than to Each Other)

In addition to tending the fires of your love, you need to make an unwavering commitment to your marriage vows. In the early years of marriage, especially if you've been arguing more than you expected—and any couples do—it can be very tempting to begin wondering if you didn't make a mistake and if it wouldn't be easier to cut your losses sooner than later. No matter how wonderful the person you married is, you may have already experienced days when you look at your spouse and think to yourself, "What was I thinking?"

The key to making it through these days—both now and throughout the rest of your married life—is making

a commitment, not just to each other, but also to the marriage itself. This means making a commitment to your vows. Research by the Relationship Institute at UCLA shows that while almost every couple is committed to each other, those couples who make an additional commitment to the relationship itself—vowing to work on the marriage even when it isn't fun and they don't feel that great about their spouse—have much greater chances to have marriages that are happy and last a lifetime.⁴

Even when staying committed to your marriage doesn't make emotional sense, your long-term success, not to mention your personal integrity, depends on your ability to keep the marital promises you made to God and yourself even when you feel as if your spouse doesn't deserve your commitment. No one gets married with the intention of getting divorced. The breakup of a marriage isn't only devastating for the loss of the relationship. It is also devastating to a person's sense of self. Feeling like a failure, wondering what is wrong with you, and wondering if you will even find happiness are all terrible things to have to struggle with. There is a Facebook meme that shows an image of an old couple with the caption, "When asked how they stayed together for sixty-five years, the couple replied, 'We come from a time where if something is broken you fix it, not throw it away.'" There is real truth behind this sentiment.

The thought that there will be days when the only thing that keeps you hanging in there is your commitment to the marriage itself doesn't have to scare you. Every couple experiences this at least briefly,

but certainly periodically, throughout a marriage. But remember, these times pass and the loving times come back—often stronger than ever. And couples who pray together, tend the fires of their love, maintain their commitment to their vows, and do all the other things we describe in this book bounce back much faster and more happily than couples who are less intentional about their marriage. Since you are now “in the know” you have nothing to fear.

Skill Building over Blaming

Finally, you need an ongoing, unwavering commitment to always be willing to learn new skills to overcome new challenges. According to SmartMarriages, an organization of marriage experts dedicated to promoting research that supports healthy marriages, successful marriages depend on skill, not your family of origin (smartmarriages.com). No newly married couple knows what they are doing when it comes to marriage. No one. Not even the people who came from the best families of origin on the planet. In fact, the more you think you have marital success figured out, the more likely it is that you will be in for a rude surprise. After all, it’s one thing to watch Mom and Dad do it well. It’s another thing to do it yourself. And if you didn’t come from an ideal background (and who does?), this is even more true. When you hit hard times and begin feeling the urge to turn against each other (or when you all too willingly give in to that urge from time to time), you must remember that it is not because your marriage is flawed. It is simply because you don’t know what you are doing and you need new skills. We want you

to remember four little words that will help you get through these times. Ready?

NEVER BLAME YOUR MARRIAGE

Write it down. Tattoo it on the back of your hand. Memorize it. Chant it. Say it until you can dance to it. Marriages do not have lives of their own. A marriage only has the life a husband and wife give it. People say things such as, “*It* just didn’t work.” or “*It* just didn’t make sense anymore.” “*It* just died.” Remember this. There is no *it*. There is just you, your spouse, and God. If your marriage is dying on the vine, it isn’t because *it* (your marriage) is broken. It is simply that you don’t currently have the skills to nurture it under

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the pressures you are currently facing. Get those skills. Read good self-help books; go on a marriage retreat; join a support group; get therapy. Resources for all of these options are listed in the back of this book. The good news is that research consistently shows that couples

who have the “don’t blame the marriage” attitude and, instead, commit to acquiring skills when they hit hard times have much higher levels of marital satisfaction and longevity.⁵ No marriage ever failed because a couple lacked skills. Rather, marriages fail because couples are too prideful to admit that they need to acquire new

skills. As it says in Proverbs 11:2, “When pride comes, disgrace follows. But with the humble is wisdom.”

The above represent the four commitments you need to make to have a great, Catholic marriage. Because anyone can choose to make these four commitments, we are confident that you do indeed have what it takes to create a joyful marriage that can stand the test of time.

Just to prove that anyone can have a great marriage, let us share a little of our story.

OUR STORY

We met as students in our junior year at university, and we had what was, by any account, a whirlwind courtship. We both had very active individual prayer lives, and we quickly began praying with each other in small ways (going to Mass together, asking for God’s blessing on our relationship, saying grace before meals, taking small prayer times together, etc.). Through this process, we both felt strongly that God was calling us together. We both knew right from the beginning that the love we had for each other really came from God’s own heart.

It wasn’t just that we were attracted to each other and liked doing many of the same things; we also connected deeply with regard to our values, beliefs, and the goals for our lives—probably not unlike you and your spouse. Even so, through our prayer life together, God made it abundantly clear that something very powerful and unique was happening in our relationship. For that reason, even though we weren’t officially engaged, on the anniversary of our first month of dating, we reserved the university